

Peoria High School History

Bethany Eckhardt

Washington School

Teacher: Mindy Juriga

When the Peoria Native Americans first surveyed the land, they, of course, had no idea what a center of architecture and history Peoria would one day become. The early founders of Peoria did not realize that in the future Peoria would house the oldest high school building west of the Allegheny Mountains. Peoria is home to countless important buildings; however, this high school seems to rise above others in significance. Since Peoria High School was built in 1916, it remains prominent for its architectural style and history.

Peoria High School is located on North Street on the fringe of downtown. But before classes commenced at this building, the school had been in use for some time. In fact, this high school is the seventeenth oldest in the nation. Founded on May 5, 1856, Peoria High is noteworthy to all residents of Peoria. In 1916 classes commenced in the building. The first class consisted of seven hundred students. Today, the numbers have increased by leaps and bounds. The school itself has occupied four different buildings. The first class was held in the former Peoria Female Academy. In 1885 Peoria High moved to a new building. After thirty-one years they became overcrowded and five acres of property on North Street were bought for the present location.

In 1916 the idea was discussed for a new building at the present site. It would enhance Peoria and also further education. A professor of architecture at the University of Illinois organized a contest for the design of this building. A young Peoria native named Frederic J. Klein was uneducated in architecture. He seemed to have a gift and was well known in the area because of his considerable talent. He is associated with several impressive buildings in Peoria: the Apollo, Madison and Rialto theaters and the Packard building.

During the history of Peoria High School, some remodeling has been required. With technology advancing as it does, Peoria High has had to accommodate those changes. In spite of this, the exterior and central buildings are the same as they were in 1916. Several new buildings have been added to the five acres of property originally bought. In 1962 a new science wing and gymnasium were added. In 1969 Central Park Pool was added. These additions have helped the school keep up with growing needs and retain student interest.

Not only is the exterior of Peoria High historic, the interior architecture is superb also. When people enter the school, they see a large stone desk facing the entrance hall. The stone desk has set in the front of the building since 1928. A long-time tradition at Peoria High, and indeed many area schools, is the tradition of class gifts. This regal stone desk started the custom of class gifts. Also, in the front entrance are two plaster slabs. These slabs are positioned above the stone desk, completing the masterpiece. Splendidly carved into the slabs are reproductions of the frieze of the Parthenon in Athens. The frieze is a wall painting, or fresco, a wonderful type of mural that Peoria High boasts in their foyer. Beyond doubt, the entrance hall of Peoria High is a masterpiece of architecture.

If one looked at Frederic Klein's resume, one might be impressed by his many architecturally sound theaters. Not only did he build the Apollo, Madison, and Hippodrome, which would become the Rialto, he also constructed the Coronado Theater in Rockford. Yet, one of his most beautiful works goes unrecognized, the Peoria High School theater. The auditorium is significant in size and extremely detailed. Architectural features include a baroque design on the face of the balcony, ornate ceiling brackets and Corinthian pilasters. On top of the pilasters are volutes, rosettes, and other fine details. Unfortunately, the exquisiteness of the theater did not remain for long. Les Kenyon, a Peoria architect, is an alumnus of Peoria High. Kenyon

treasured his past with Peoria High and was very fond of the auditorium and the memories it held. He desired to enhance the auditorium's historical design. Kenyon's plans included restoring all upholstery and painting to the original colors. The ceiling was painted white, the walls shades of maroon, rosebud, and pink. The carpet and the upholstery on chairs are now burgundy. The auditorium is historically striking. One expert said, "Kids today just don't see rooms like this..." [From R. Brown, "Fond Memories Inspire Auditorium Face-lift," *The Journal Star*, Jan. 4, 2000; Jim David, The Peoria High School Building, <http://peoria.k12.il.us/peoriahs/PHStour/tour-start.htm> (Sept. 14, 2003); Dave Grebner, "History is More Than Just Academic at Peoria High," *Central Peoria Observer*, Jun. 20, 1984; Mike Roeder, "Peoria High: 125 Years Worth of Education, Pride," *The Journal Star*, Mar. 26, 1981; Linda Sahn, "Proposed Copy for Auditorium Plaque," *The Opinion*, Sep. 2, 2003; Vivere Research, Peoria Central High School, <http://www.historicpeoria.com/select.cfm?chose=106> (Sept. 13, 2003).]